

# Wardrobe matter: the sorting, displacement and circulation of women's clothing

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## Abstract

This paper develops a reading of the wardrobe which emphasises the wardrobe's location within the consumption practices of tidying, sorting and the displacement of clothing. Its emphasis is on the circulation of clothing matter and the transience of clothing consumption, not—as recent accounts have stressed—the accumulation, collection and wearing of clothing. Using primarily the example of maternity wear, the paper outlines how clothing matter circulates amongst and between women (between siblings, between friends and amongst neighbours and acquaintances) and accounts for this practice. It argues that maternity wear circulation is both an embodied divestment/recovery ritual and about the making of mothers, through its appeal to thrift, sacrifice and making-do. The paper concludes by reflecting on the significance of the absence of maternity wear from women's wardrobes and by suggesting that wardrobes need to be thought of not just as containers of memory, but as temporary holding places in the lives of clothes, and as pivotally positioned as a fulcrum for clothing movement, between wearing, storage and displacement.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent geographical work on clothing has evolved from an initial and exclusive concern with fashion production systems and retailing (Crewe and Davenport, 1992; Crewe and Forster, 1993; Crewe and Lowe, 1996) to encompass clothing consumption, specifically the shopping for and acquisition of clothing (Chua, 1992; Gregson et al., 2002) and, less frequently, practices of wearing and their connections to identity work and identity performance (Dwyer, 1999; Gregson et al., 2001; McDowell and Court, 1994). Although a great deal of this work continues to be positioned within the frame of the commodity chain (Crewe, 2003; Dwyer and Jackson, 2003), there is much that we find attractive in this development; notably that an emphasis on wearing opens-up the possibility of furthering more embodied readings of consumption (and see too Entwistle, 2000, 2001). Nonetheless, wearing-centred accounts of cloth-

ing consumption tend to restrict themselves to the 'present-ness' of wearing and dress: their emphasis is on visible, worn assemblages of clothing and their meanings, be these inferred or intended. Correspondingly, what is frequently overlooked in such accounts are the anxieties and ambiguities of wearing clothing: the apparent certainties conferred by acts of wearing mask that wearing practices are frequently provisional and tentative, both in their anticipation and in their moments of actual wearing (Miller and Clarke, 2002; and see too Entwistle, 1997; Green, 2001). Moreover, as Banim and Guy (2001) have suggested recently, wearing is intrinsically about the anxieties of "wardrobe moments"—epitomised by the "what am I going to wear?" question. As such, wearing is simultaneously about the conjuncture of subjectivities and identities in the sartorial; interior modes of being with the exteriorities of appearance.

Banim and Guy's own work points to the significance within women's wardrobes of clothes that are no longer worn. Important, in that this shows clothes to have lives beyond their production, acquisition and wearing, and in its counter to arguments that locate their understanding purely within the fashion industry and

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system (Ash and Wilson, 1992; Craik, 1993; Fine and Leopold, 1993; Wilson, 1985), there are still difficulties with this position.<sup>1</sup> Notable amongst these is that this is a reading of the wardrobe which centres clothing presences. In contrast, the reading of the wardrobe which we develop here is located within the spatialities of consumption work and practice. Wardrobes, we argue, are not just about accumulations and assemblages of clothing, for wearing or not. Instead, they encompass the consumption practices of tidying, storage, divestment and displacement. The opening and closing of wardrobe doors and, for that matter, chests of drawers, acts as both a marker of actual consumption practices with clothes and as metaphor. Clothes circulate. They have lives with their initial possessors and lives which may exceed them (Appadurai, 1986; Clarke, 2000; Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Tranberg Hansen, 2000). But it is in the gap enabled by opening and shutting doors and drawers, and the connections between this gap and the consumption practices of wearing, laundering, tidying and sorting, that the possibilities for clothing's divestment and circulation are opened-up. Wardrobe doors and drawers then are the interior domestic parallels to exterior doors; they enable exitings just as much as they allow for an accumulation in things (Hetherington, 2002).<sup>2</sup>

The paper develops this position by drawing on two research projects.<sup>3</sup> One of these is an ethnographic project on ridding, in which clothing circulation looms large; the second focuses exclusively on maternity wear. Maternity wear can be regarded as a special case of women's clothing, and of clothing circulation. Certainly, its temporalities of wearing for individual pregnant women are short, typically only five to six months.<sup>4</sup> As

<sup>1</sup> For an account which moves beyond the identification of fashion within the Western fashion industry, see Rabine (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Hetherington configures the wardrobe, along with many other zones of domestic space, as a conduit for disposal. Although the reading of the wardrobe developed here has some similarities with this position, our emphasis is on the wardrobe's location within the circulation of clothing matter.

<sup>3</sup> The ethnography on which we draw here is part of an ongoing ESRC funded project on Disposal, devaluation and consumerism (R000239972), in collaboration with Louise Crewe and Alan Metcalfe, School of Geography, Nottingham University. The ethnography was conducted by Nicky Gregson, and was located in North-east England. The second research project is doctoral research conducted by Vikki Beale (ESRC: R0042983470) at the Department of Geography, Sheffield University, on maternity wear (Beale, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> These temporalities typically commence around 16 weeks into the pregnancy and last post partum. Maternity wear therefore is not just worn during pregnancy. Although most women who become pregnant do wear maternity wear of some form, it should be noted that a few women in the UK continue to get-by by clothing their pregnancies in nothing other than leggings and baggy t-shirts. By definition, such women are not women in most forms of paid employment, almost all of which require them to dress rather differently, be this by providing a uniform or by having particular sartorial codes.

such, maternity wear might appear an unusual instance of clothing to use to develop our argument. But, as we show here, unusual instances frequently have a great deal to tell us, in this case about the wardrobe. In Section 2 of the paper we develop a reading of the wardrobe based on clothing flows and circulation rather than on accumulations of clothing matter, using the ethnographic work as illustration. As we show in Sections 3 and 4 of the paper, maternity wear provides another particularly apposite form of women's clothing to help us think through such flows and circulations. In Section 3 of the paper we illustrate the practice of the circulation of maternity wear, showing that this frequently comprises a shared wardrobe moving within and between female kinship, friendship and neighbourhood groups, defining these through the trajectories of cloth. In Section 4 we account for this, arguing that maternity wear circulation is both an embodied divestment and recovery ritual and, simultaneously, indicative of the consumption imperatives of thrift, sacrifice and the appropriateness of making-do. We conclude the paper in Section 5 by reflecting more generally on the theoretical significance of circulating maternity wear and on the mobility of wardrobe matter.

## 2. Wardrobe matter

Recent work on women and clothing has begun to move away from accounts located exclusively within the imperatives of fashion to address clothing consumption, specifically the shopping for and wearing of clothes, and women's relationship to both clothing in general and their clothes in particular (Banim et al., 2001). It is the latter strand of research which has highlighted how central clothing is to women's identity (Franklin, 1998; Kennedy, 1998; Oates, 1998; Smith, 1998); the significance of clothing to the constitution of memory (Layne, 1999; Mara, 1998), and the ways in which clothing constitutes a material record of a life lived, in places, events, moments and phases—dresses that were worn on special occasions, shoes that were part of a teenage identity, a few baby clothes even. In turn, an unexamined consequence of these explorations has been to promote a particular reading of the wardrobe, as an accumulation of clothing matter, including the currently worn and the no longer worn but touched and looked at ciphers for remembering. As such, the contents of the wardrobe have come to be portrayed as a materialisation of the identities and the biography of a particular woman.

Although we would not want to deny the importance of such readings, the position we promote here is one which sees the wardrobe not just as a repository and container of meaning, but as pivotally positioned in the practices of clothing consumption, and therefore within

clothing flows. For us the wardrobe has a double significance for understanding clothing flows. One facet of this relates to its physical materiality; the physical entity of the wardrobe, manufactured as a container for clothes, made from pine, chipboard, or built-in to a room, is a physical form designed and manufactured for clothing's careful storage, with doors that open, shut and/or slide, rails for hanging and shelves for folded clothes. As such, even when modified and extended by within-wardrobe storage systems of the type widely available from stores such as IKEA, the physical materiality of the wardrobe provides finite limits for clothing storage.<sup>5</sup> The second way in which the wardrobe relates to clothing flows is in its connection to wearing and "the wardrobe moment". Our wardrobes at any one moment provide us with a range of potential clothes and clothing assemblages, which we pull out of clothes storage zones, try out together and appraise, put on and take off in our efforts to constitute appropriateness—for work, going to the theatre, to a party, for a 'black tie' event (Tseñlon, 2001). In this sense, our wardrobe is the sum of clothing matter possessed. Conjoining both these senses, we can see that the wardrobe is bound up not just with the practices of storing and wearing clothes but with those that surround its caring too, washing, ironing, dry-cleaning, and that—as a consequence—clothing matter flows around the house, from room to room, spilling out from the wardrobe to include piles in laundry areas, on chests of drawers and on bedroom floors. As we show now, using material from a recent ethnography, this double sense of the wardrobe is both visible in clothing consumption within households and has significant effects.

Ellie is a high investor in clothing and its consumption. She is late 20s, co-habiting with her partner Steve and their two children, Lisa (6) and Tara (22 months), and has a career in child-protection social work. It would be fair to say that Ellie loves shopping generally, and clothes shopping in particular, both for herself and for her daughters. The weekly supermarket shop routinely extends to include the seductions of cheap, colourful children's clothing and Ellie regularly buys clothes for herself on the high street, in Next, Marks and Spencer, Gap and Dorothy Perkins. However, Ellie does not try these purchases on before buying them, because she is invariably shopping with a young child and, like many women, she is not an expert at which clothing styles and colours suit her. Indeed, in recognition of this she has recently bought herself a copy of the best-selling *What Not To Wear* and intends to get herself coloured

(Miller and Clarke, 2002).<sup>6</sup> The effects of Ellie's patterns of clothing acquisition for herself are that she frequently finds that she has bought things which, whilst they looked fine on the hanger, turn out to look not so good on. She often wears them once and then passes them on, to her mother Pauline or to friends preferably but to a charity shop if these routes fail. Meantime, the girls' bedrooms are frequently piled high with clothing. Their clothes already way exceed the storage capacities of their wardrobes and chests of drawers. This situation is not just the product of Ellie's love of shopping. Rather, it is both the product of and exacerbated by Ellie's tendency to buy cheap children's clothing as a solution to her various ironing crises: rather than iron, Ellie would prefer to spend £10 on an outfit for her toddler on her weekly supermarket trip. The consequence however is that children's clothing accumulates and accumulates, indicative of the block between washing and wearing clothes in this household. Already Lisa routinely engages in tidying and sorting her things, including her clothes as well as her toys. She is encouraged by Ellie to place those that she no longer likes in a discard pile on the landing, and these clothes—along with Tara's outgrown ones—are routinely sorted through by Ellie, and then passed on, either within Ellie's friendship group or via work. As well as encompassing washing, occasional ironing and dry cleaning then, the within-household practices of clothing consumption in this household are routinely about tidying and sorting every household member's clothes and replacing them (or attempting to replace them) within clothes storage spaces. But, as we can see, for the female household members at least, tidying and sorting routinely involve casting-out and divestment.<sup>7</sup> Rather than being accumulated, clothing in this household is routinely released back into circulation, as a means to manage its accumulation and as a means of rectifying mistake acquisitions. Rather than

<sup>6</sup> Getting "coloured" refers to the practice discussed in Miller and Clarke (2002, pp. 205–9). Organised on a party-plan principle akin to Tupperware (Clarke, 1998) and Ann Summers (Storr, 2003), *Colour Me Beautiful* allocates women to seasons, and to particular colour hues and gradations. "Knowing one's colours" confers a framework both for making and rejecting particular clothing choices and can be used both to shape shopping practices and wardrobe evaluations. In a similar vein the success of Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine's television programme *What Not To Wear*, and particularly its best-selling accompanying book, is located—at least partially—in its offering of rules and principles to shape women's clothes purchases. Rather than being colour specific, this regulatory framework links body shape, body parts and clothing styles/cuts to constitute a set of rules for women who see themselves as having particularly problematic body bits, in practice most women.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, and paralleling previous research (Gregson et al., 2000), Steve's clothing is not subjected to practices of casting out to anything like the same degree. Whilst a few of his clothes have been passed on to other family members including Ellie's brother, most continue to be worn until they wear out.

<sup>5</sup> For a more general argument about the importance of storage discourses and practice within consumption, see Cwerner and Metcalfe (2003).

being locked into the spatiality of one home and its physical containers for storing clothes, the consumption practices that pivot around the wardrobes of this mother and her children constitute clothing flows.

Whilst Ellie is a prime counter example to the wardrobes as accumulations of things position, she is by no means exceptional. Elsewhere in this ethnography, and in a previous project, households have been encountered who routinely tidy and sort their clothes in ways which always include a cast-outs pile (Fig. 1). Here unwanted and/or no longer used clothing is kept ready for charity neighbourhood bag-drops, in a manner which suggests that casting-out is a routine part of their clothing consumption (Gregson and Crewe, 2003). Moreover, other households in this ethnography have routinely used the charity bag-drop as prompts to go through and sort out their things (Fig. 2). And, although there were those who did tend just to accumulate, they were in the distinct minority. As argued elsewhere, the practices of casting-out clothing are themselves enabled by the proliferation in sites of second-hand exchange through the 1990s, but these sites themselves and the presence of routine bag-drops in neighbourhoods also work to suggest casting-out and the consumption work of tidying, sorting and displacement that precedes this as normative. One of the effects of this is that clothing is a more mobile facet of material culture than has hitherto been presumed, circulating—as in the above instance—within and amongst known and unknown social networks, as well as within exchanges that encompass the



Fig. 1. Cast-out clothing awaiting the next charity doorstep collection.



Fig. 2. Sorted-out, bagged-up and offered: a response to the prompt of the charity doorstep collection.

entanglements of development aid appeals and international second-hand clothing markets (Tranberg Hansen, 2000). Back within the household, the mobility of clothing matter—its flow within and out of the house—suggests that we need to be open to a rather different conceptualisation of the wardrobe, one which sees this not as accumulated matter out of circulation but as matter located within a continual flow of storage, wearing, laundering, tidying, sorting and casting-out, and as a physical materiality which is a holding place, but only a holding place, a temporary suspension in clothing's flow.

In the following two sections we provide further evidence for the circulation of clothing matter amongst women, using the specific case of maternity wear. Our focus on maternity wear as an exemplar is indicative of two of its defining characteristics. First, and in relation to the literature that highlights the significance of clothing to women's identities and memory work, it seems that maternity wear is a striking absence from women's wardrobes of memory. Included in the litany of clothes that women keep but no longer wear are many items—wedding dresses, shoes, accessories, dresses, coats—but maternity wear, it seems, is not amongst them. Absences such as this are of critical significance to enhancing the conceptualisation of the wardrobe,

indicative through their absence from individual wardrobes of certain clothes' capacities to circulate. Secondly, the circulation of maternity wear is itself a marker of both pregnancy and motherhood. Much like with baby clothes and young children's clothing then, there is a traffick in these things which marks them out as distinctive forms of material culture, forms through which socialities of women and key social identities are forged. As will become clear, it is this which goes part way to accounting for the absence of maternity wear from women's wardrobes of clothes they keep but no longer wear.

### 3. Between sisters, friends and neighbours: the circulation of maternity wear

At best overlooked in accounts of women's relationship with their clothes, more frequently denigrated and castigated as the antithesis of 'style', maternity wear has a troubled relationship with the Western fashion industry and a problematic location in the UK high street.<sup>8</sup> Written out by Western fashion's designs and designers—for whom the pregnant body is the abject counterpart to the disciplined, worked-on, toned and slender female body configurations iconised within the industry—maternity wear lacks a strong visibility on the UK high street, where trickle down mechanisms continue to prevail. As a consequence, dressing through pregnancy for many women living in the UK is characterised by an increasing degree of sartorial exclusion, one that compounds the effects of the corporeality of pregnancy itself. It is not just that pregnant bodies, particularly heavily pregnant bodies, are deemed out of place within stores, malls and high streets (Longhurst, 1994, 2000), but such bodies are written out of the material culture that is mass-produced women's clothing. Confined to less than a handful of high street stores, and frequently available through mail-order catalogues only, the paucity of maternity wear provision on the high street in the UK<sup>9</sup> is one of the reasons why maternity wear commonly circulates amongst and between networks of women, as a means of managing the

paucity in available, affordable provision. Indeed, of the twenty women interviewed over the course of this research,<sup>10</sup> less than a handful reported either not having received such items from other women or not having given their maternity wear to others.<sup>11</sup> As we show through a range of instances though, there is rather more to this circulation than simply helping manage a clothing deficit.

There are three primary paths of maternity wear circulation identified by this research, between siblings and other familial relatives, between friends, and between acquaintances, with many women's pregnancies being marked by at least one of these and maybe more.<sup>12</sup> All are characterised by the exchange of an accumulation of maternity wear, usually from one recently pregnant woman to a currently pregnant recipient, rather than—as with other forms of clothing circulation—the exchange or loan of a few discarded items (Section 2; Abbott and Sapsford, 2001). In this way, the circulation of maternity wear is indicative of its status as a wardrobe within a wardrobe.

Carolyn is early forties, a mother of two children under five at the time of interview, living in Manchester and working full time as a secondary school teacher. She describes her acquisition of her maternity wear thus:

My cousin—my younger cousin had been, she'd had her baby nine months before [Carolyn's first child] was born. She works in a bank so she had

<sup>8</sup> Lest it be thought that this troubled relationship pertains exclusively to Western clothing and styles of dress, see Banerjee and Miller (2003, pp. 16–17).

<sup>9</sup> On the UK high street only Dorothy Perkins and Mothercare routinely stock maternity wear, whilst Next, a major women's clothing high street retailer, carries a maternity range which by and large is only available through mail order. Other mainstream retailers, including Marks and Spencer and much more recently Top Shop have experimented with a maternity range, whilst Blooming Marvellous and JoJo—the two major mail order maternity wear companies in the UK—have a small number of shop retail outlets, located off the high street.

<sup>10</sup> This research, conducted over 1998–2000, involved sequential interviews with women living in Manchester, Bradford and Northampton, who were either pregnant at the time of interview, or who had been recently pregnant. It also included participant observation in two independent maternity wear retail outlets, for 18 months and 6 months respectively. The interview subjects were white British, aged between 16 and early 40s and for the most part in relatively stable heterosexual partnerships. Whilst they were relatively socially homogenous, they were living in widely divergent financial circumstances and had variable commitments to and investments in paid employment and careers.

<sup>11</sup> Far from being indicative of an aversion to receiving second-hand maternity wear, those who did not receive this clothing did so for reasons which confirm the importance of the social networks discussed in this section. Either they were the first or only ones in their particular social network to become pregnant, or they had several friends and/or family members who were simultaneously pregnant. Somewhat intriguingly, and unlike previous research, this suggests that the potency of the new within particular social groups, and particularly the capacity of the wearing of second-hand clothing to mark class distinctions, is somewhat reduced in the special case of maternity wear (cf McRobbie, 1989; Skeggs, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Although we do not explore this issue further here, another significant facet of maternity wear circulation is that it assumes a singular pregnant body. In their individual details, the clothes that circulate here may well reflect the style choices of those who have originally purchased them, however the practice of circulation assumes a homogeneity defined by the state of pregnancy.

styles which I could use. My sister had also passed I think a big, big blue skirt on to her, which was, you know, she said “Oh, have this as well”. And that was ideal for me, cos again my sister’s a pharmacist, and she works in you know dealing with the public, and you could mix and match things with those things.

Vikki: So that was a big help?

Oh yes, that was a big help. It saved me. I mean, apart from the pinafore and I think maybe two blouses [which she had bought for herself new] I didn’t think I actually bought any more for my, for that maternity [...] because I got some other stuff, two more blouses passed on to me by somebody at school. I was quite happy to use those. I felt that I hadn’t put in an excessive amount of money beyond what I would normally buy in the course of a year. I hadn’t had to go out and buy a complete new wardrobe just because I was pregnant.

As Carolyn makes clear, the biography of her maternity wear includes items which are in their second and third cycles of consumption at least. As she goes on to explain, this is intimately bound up with both her valuation of maternity wear per se, and her perceived valuation of maternity wear in relation to other forms of material culture, notably baby-related things:

I didn’t want to buy something that I knew I was only going to use for a few months and so I wanted the money that we had saved into buying things for the baby which I mean, you know, especially with your first, is a tremendous expenditure. I mean you’ve got £200 worth of buggy, £100 worth of cot and you’re looking, you’re looking by the time you’re finished I would think that’s £300 gone straightaway, you’re looking at about £400, £500 you know for your first child. You don’t want to be out—well I certainly didn’t want to be outlaying that on posh maternity wear

Carolyn’s maternity wear then was primarily composed from circulating matter, from her sister, a cousin and a work friend/acquaintance. Moreover, we can see from the above that the circulation itself is positively valued, for the way in which this enables her and her partner to allocate their finances to the purchase of new baby things. In contrast Natriece—who is in her early 20s and married to a professional footballer living in Bradford—invests heavily in consumption, does not have a paid job and normally dresses exclusively in designer clothing. During her pregnancy however, Natriece relied on a handful of items of clothing—literally

five—which she bought for herself from Mothercare,<sup>13</sup> alongside a small “wardrobe” that had been built-up through the (again minimal) purchases made by her sisters for their pregnancies. These were passed on to Natriece. The arrangement between the sisters—there are three—seems to be one of pooling and accumulation, with each sister adding a few items during their pregnancy and handing “the wardrobe” on to the next one who becomes pregnant:

My other sisters had been pregnant as well, they all had maternity wear anyway, and we just passed it round the family—actually there wasn’t that much to go round because my two sisters had been pregnant so they only buy the minimum stuff because you don’t want to spend the money. So now that we’ve—like my sister’s been pregnant again and I was pregnant—the wardrobe’s gone bigger and bigger and so we’ve got quite a good like sack to pass around now really.

We will come back to the potential significance of the sack later, concentrating for the moment on the considerable discrepancy between Natriece’s clothing consumption when pregnant compared to otherwise. As evidenced by her trip to Mothercare, like Carolyn, Natriece was reluctant to outlay much money on maternity wear, nor to spend much time looking for it. However, Natriece’s motivations here are far from exclusively about thrift or the elevation of new baby-related things over clothing the pregnant body. Instead, they are also to do with an acute ambivalence toward her pregnant corporeality. Ordinarily a consumer of designer fashion, and a non-pregnant UK size 10, during pregnancy Natriece opted to dress her pregnancy in terms of concealment and pragmatism, rather than through what she termed fashion and style:

I did really change my style because—if I was going out now, the stuff that I wore when I was pregnant was quite different to what I’d wear now, but that’s because I wear quite tight things anyway

Vikki: So why wouldn’t you have worn that when you were pregnant?

<sup>13</sup> Mothercare is a UK mass market, high street retailer, with stores which are also located in out-of-town retail parks. Primary stock lines are concerned with baby-care: they include prams, buggies, cots and baby/children’s clothing, as well as toys and health-related products. Mothercare also stocks a wide range of ‘nursing bras’, and a small selection of maternity wear which appeals to value-for-money criteria. That Natriece, who would ordinarily not shop anywhere near the high street, opts to purchase a small amount of clothing from Mothercare says much about her (low) investment in maternity wear clothing.

Tight things? I don't think it looks right, but that's my personal opinion. Like I think if you buy maternity wear that is supposed to be tight it doesn't look too bad. But if you go out and buy like tops that are meant to be worn by everyday people it looks horrific. But that's just my personal opinion.

Vikki: Is that because it doesn't sit properly or just

Well if I'm fat anyway I get a real thing about it anyway and I just didn't find myself wanting to—I mean you could tell I was pregnant but I still put on a lot of weight as well so I didn't want to show off my fat really—laughs

Equating her pregnant body with a fat body, and construing this body as one that should be covered up, not shown off, Natriece's remarks here hover intriguingly around a sense of the abjectness of pregnancy (her emphasis on the horrific is important here). Her pregnant corporeality was not something that she—with particularly high investments in Western fashion—felt comfortable in visually, and her maternity wear consequently became clothing to make-do in and with; a sign in its style and extent of her negative emotions toward her body. In contrast, Jayne—a non-pregnant UK size 18—found it easier to accommodate her pregnant body in clothing than her non-pregnant body; unlike Natriece, Jayne found pregnancy to confer a degree of legitimacy on her size. This finding may or may not extend beyond this particular research subject, but it is certainly suggestive as to the complex and contradictory ways in which pregnancy, size and 'fat' entwine within individual lived corporealities.

Friendship networks are also common socialities within which maternity wear circulates, to the extent that there can be competition for the maternity wear available within any one network. Linda, an early thirties mother of one from Bradford, remarks:

I was going to [borrow from others] and then I just didn't get round to it, and then I had another friend and someone else got pregnant before I did, so I just missed the boat sort of thing

The very fact that Linda could not borrow from one particular friend because someone else in the friendship network became pregnant just before her illustrates just how prevalent maternity wear circulation actually is. In turn, Linda—notwithstanding that she had not received clothing from others and had had to acquire hers new—passed her maternity wear (bought almost entirely in a sale in Mothercare) on to another friend, Meg:

I knew that with it being their last she wouldn't want to buy stuff so I said if she wanted to have it

What is interesting to note here is not just the circulation of this maternity wear but the reasons for it. Linda assumed (correctly) that Meg would not wish to spend much (if anything) on maternity clothes during her final pregnancy. The tacit assumption however, and indeed an assumption that marks the circulation of maternity wear within friendship networks is that the maternity wear will return (if necessary) to the initial gifter. Ari, for example, the first in her friendship group to become pregnant, had passed around her maternity wear from her first pregnancy, initially to a friend (Sarah), who in turn had handed it on to another mutual friend (Jayne). A few years later, after the birth of Jayne's baby, it returned to her, just before she became pregnant with her second child.

Finally, and in very different circumstances of social knowing, Vikki's pregnancy<sup>14</sup> was marked by the passing-on of maternity wear from a woman acquaintance considerably older than herself (Gill), whose dress style is markedly different from her own, and who had completed her family. Notwithstanding the casualness of knowing and the gap between them in age and sartorial style, Gill clearly felt that offering and giving her maternity wear to Vikki was an appropriate practice to engage in, whilst Vikki in turn felt it appropriate to accept, although here there was no obligation for the clothing to return to its giver. Indeed, the clothing is now circulating amongst Vikki's friendship network. In circumstances of acquaintance rather than friendship then, there is evidence for the circulation of maternity wear amongst pregnant women being not only normative but also about seeking to constitute the normative. Indeed, in the moral economies of circulating collective accumulations of maternity wear we see the prefiguring of another version of the same normative, one shaped through the circulation and traffick in baby-related things and baby clothes (Clarke, 2000).

#### 4. The significance of maternity wear circulation

The various forms of traffick in maternity wear identified in Section 3—between kin, between friends and within neighbourhoods—are ones which bear considerable similarity to the passage of children's clothes within the hand-me-down clothing economy identified by Clarke (2000), although intriguingly, and unlike children's clothing, maternity wear does not seem to figure in second-hand market places such as nearly new sales, car

<sup>14</sup> This Vikki is Vikki Beale, late twenties mother of one, living in Northampton. In including some of Vikki's experiences of maternity wear circulation, we are engaging in a practice of writing which includes authors as research subjects without celebrating their practices (see too Hallam and Hockey, 2001) or resorting to the autobiographical (Okely and Callaway, 1992; Okely, 1996).

boot sales and charity shops. Instead, circulation appears to be both strictly non-monetary and distinctly gift like. At the same time, however, these gifts are no ordinary gifts, for two reasons. Firstly, because maternity wear is clearly understood to be gifted to be passed-on, more a loaning than possessions. Secondly, because these are gifts constituted through acts of divestment. This makes circulating maternity wear potentially troublesome matter. For the giver then, as we show in Section 4.1, maternity wear is discarded, unwanted clothing; clothing whose displacement is a thoroughly embodied divestment ritual, bound up in the recovery of the non-pregnant body. For the recipient though, the same characteristics might appear to make maternity wear potentially a difficult gift through which to constitute value. However, as we argue in Section 4.2, this is not the case: the practice of maternity wear circulation is shown to provide the context for the emergence of a set of values intimately bound up in the socialites of early motherhood and in the moralities of its practice, specifically thrift, sacrifice and making-do (Miller, 1998).

#### 4.1. *Hand-around: a divestment and recovery ritual*

For many of the women encountered in the course of this research, the divestment of their maternity wear represented an act of immense significance; specifically a marking of the reclamation of and a return to a “normal”, non-pregnant body and the concomitant ability to be able “to get back into my own clothes”, or at the very least into clothing that is not labelled as maternity wear. Such practices appear to suggest that maternity wear is regarded as troublesome matter by many pregnant women, and that this trouble is an intensely material matter, entwining embodiment and clothing in ways that signal pregnancy and maternity wear as the negative other to the non-pregnant body and “ordinary clothing”.<sup>15</sup> Bound up with an embodiment that is widely regarded by pregnant women, as well as by others, as the antithesis of normative heterosexual femininity—in which pregnancy is associated with the abject, described in terms which associate it with large mammals, and experienced as a body that is out-of-control and uncontrollable—pregnancy changes many women’s relationship to their clothing profoundly. For some women, particularly those such as Natriece with high

investments in fashion and a particular (UK size 10) embodiment, the entire experience of clothing her first pregnancy proved traumatic: as we saw, not only did she purchase very little maternity wear but she changed her entire way of dressing, from revealing body-contouring outlines to cover-over baggy. For others, particularly those such as Carolyn, whose employment she deemed to require a certain type of (professional) sartorial performance, the chief difficulty was the mismatch between the required sartorial performance and her embodiment. Indeed, the absence of affordable maternity wear suiting from UK high street stores can be regarded not just to make clothing such bodies difficult but as indicative of deeper ambivalences, if not prejudices, about the place of pregnancy and pregnant bodies within the professional workplace. Although we could go on, the point is made: in various ways, pregnancy works to destabilise women’s relationship to their existing clothes and to their styles of dressing their bodies. However, this destabilising is also about accommodating the pregnant body within the material fabric of maternity wear.

For those who have ever purchased, worn, looked at or handled maternity wear, its material capacities will be well known. For those who have not, this is a form of clothing whose expansiveness is startling and dramatic, indicative when first purchased of the capacity of the pregnant body to expand and of the potential future in fleshiness. Voluminous, occasionally still manufactured in ways that mark its difference from ordinary women’s clothing—through for example the use of the pouch—maternity wear is widely described in its retailing as “lacking hanger appeal”, a euphemism which speaks volumes about the negativity invested in it.<sup>16</sup> Taken in conjunction with the relatively short duration for which these clothes will be worn and the imperatives to acquire other, particularly baby-related, things, it is perhaps not surprising that the maternity wear wardrobes of these research subjects were not extensive. Needless to say, this has effects too on practices of wearing, particularly in the later stages of pregnancy, where many women talked about “living in” the same old thing, “day-in-day-out” until they were “sick of it”.

Look at this dress [a grey jersey with brown print flower pattern]. I mean this is just so unbelievably

<sup>15</sup> Further confirmation for this reading is provided by the ethnographic research in which older post-menopausal women, all of them mothers, tried to clothes shop for their changing body shapes. Comments from shop assistants on the lines of “maybe you could look in maternity wear” when they tried to find trousers to fit their expanding middles were treated with considerable hostility by all concerned, precisely because they were not pregnant, could not be pregnant and did not consider themselves as in any need of maternity wear.

<sup>16</sup> Prior to the widespread use of stretchy, non-body-constricting fabrics in maternity wear manufacture, the pouch was the main way of accommodating pregnancy’s growth within cloth. It was a common facet of certain key garments, notably trousers. In its design, the pouch resonated clearly with the fastening of another common maternity wear garment, dungarees; and it has distinct connections with the Velcro front-fastenings on babies’ nappies. The pouch and its fastening—although now outmoded—provides one of the best instances of how the difference of the pregnant body was manufactured into its clothing.



hideous. I can't believe I ever wore this [...] but I wore it, absolutely loads (Ari, late twenties, mother of one, Bradford)

I probably only had about four or five outfits, and at the end I had a couple, like two outfits I could get into. Whereas normally you probably have like 10 or 15 different combinations at least in your wardrobe that you can wear, I mean most people have lots more than that. But if you're only down to about four combinations you just get so—bored and sick" (Sarah, mid twenties, mother of two, Bradford).

It is, we suggest, these practices of repetitive yet restrictive wearing, combined with the positioning of maternity wear (and the pregnant body it frames) as the other to "ordinary clothing" and to the non-pregnant female body which explains why women are so keen to get rid of their maternity wear. This divestment ritual is a symbolic recovery ritual: displacement is simultaneously a means of reclaiming a remembered body through a return to "ordinary clothing" and of casting-out the pregnant body through its associated clothing. Maternity wear then, is a form of clothing that few seem to want to memorialise, and that most want to consign to the practice of handing around. Cue Natricee's sack. For most women exchanging maternity wear, the medium of this exchange—its carrier—is a black plastic bin-liner bag or its equivalent; Vikki's clothing was handed over in a number of Tesco carrier bags. Compared to the care and attention-to-storage details lavished on many other pieces of women's clothing, notably infrequently worn items such as special occasion dresses and accessories or once-worn garments such as wedding dresses—which are covered in plastic covers and wrapped in paper and/or tissues—maternity wear is seemingly folded and placed in a plastic bag; passed around like other forms of second-hand clothing such as that put out for charity bag drops or taken to jumble sales. Contained in such matter, the very materiality of its movement seems indicative of its devaluation for its former wearer. As we show below, the task for its recipient is to revalue the contents of this black bin-liner. As we see in the following section though, this is not the difficult business which it might at first seem.

#### *4.2. Seeking value: recontextualising maternity wear through practices of circulation*

On receiving her black bin liner of maternity wear, Vikki remembers going through a process of what she terms "cherry picking"—sorting through the bags and choosing a number of items she considered to be acceptable enough to wear; a cream long sleeve top from Blooming Marvellous, an orange long sleeve t shirt and

a long sleeved white linen shirt, both from Dorothy Perkins. The rest was left folded up in the plastic bags in the bottom of the guest bedroom wardrobe. Meryl too—a thirty-something primary school teacher pregnant with her first child—recounts something similar, and some of the tensions this may set up:

A couple of people gave me things [...] But actually, to be honest, some of them, some of the clothes I've been given I've not worn [...] Actually there were three people (who gave her things). Two of them are close friends and one was a parent, which was a bit awkward, a bit awkward because of not being able to, you know, whether the parents see that I'm actually wearing them.

These practices of sifting and sorting through, and of making evaluative judgements about particular items of maternity wear are ones which are attendant upon any receipt of gifted second-hand clothing (see Clarke, 2000; Gregson et al., 2000). What is striking about maternity wear however, is not so much that particular items are extracted as suitable for revaluation through wearing and others not, but that the integrity of the maternity wear wardrobe is preserved in its consumption. Rather than, as with hand-me-downs—where things are extracted and the rest consigned to another site of second-hand exchange—things are extracted from these hand-arounds, worn and then returned to the pile post-partum. Moreover, things are added to this pile too; things that have been bought. Hence the collective quality of the accumulated wardrobe is preserved, and enhanced, through wearing, storage, additional acquisitions and circulation. What this suggests is that, rather than value being located in specific items of clothing and their wearing, it is in the practice of circulation and assumed prior wearing that value is made.

There are several possible reasons why this is so. One of these is quite simply a question of provision and availability in circumstances of perceived scarcity. In circumstances where many pregnant women see the high street as providing them with "nothing", then anything could be seen to be welcome, particularly if this is also seen to facilitate getting on with the acquisition of baby-related things. But there is more to it than this. What circulation enables is the inter-household exchange of a very different set of values around clothing to those which adult women typically constitute through their clothing practices. Rather than being a matter of acquisition, possession and accumulation, combined with tidying, sorting and displacement (Section 2), maternity wear appears here as a collective wardrobe which constitutes through its trajectories socialities of women who have been and who currently are pregnant. The appeal of this for its recipients seems to lie with its capacity to provide sartorial and emotional security. As Vikki

relates regarding her received maternity wear: what I've found interesting about my experience of this clothing is that, whilst I may not particularly have appreciated it stylistically, it did have other tangible qualities that I found attractive. It had potency as maternity wear and transferred legitimacy to my own pregnant identity—particularly when my body was less obviously visibly pregnant—because I knew it had been worn by another woman when she was pregnant and by a woman who I identified as a mother. It made me feel a particular way when wearing it; its associations made me feel more pregnant. At a time when many women, particularly those in their first pregnancies, may be attempting to deal with a complex array of emotions and a changing identity, handed-around maternity wear contains in its fabric the security that other women have been here too.

At the same time, the circulation of the unselected, selected-for-you wardrobe, works to forge strong notions of making-do, which in turn connect up with some of the values which sit centrally within moralities of mothering, thrift and sacrifice. In this way then, the circulation of maternity wear would seem to pre-empt and to foreshadow pregnant women's futures, as mothers. Its passage not only provides the conditions for the emergence of different contexts and ways of constituting value through clothing consumption (which are frequently re-enacted in relation to young children's clothing) but it introduces women to some of the ways in which mothers constitute value systems, through moral economies that centre the circulation, and not simply the conspicuous acquisition, of things and through practices of exchange that are not necessarily enacted through the market.

## 5. Conclusions

There are three sets of conclusions that we would wish to draw in this paper. Two concern maternity wear; the third relates to wardrobe matter more generally.

Firstly, and a comment made by all the referees on an earlier draft of this paper, there is the phenomenon of pregnancy chic, and its potential to effect changes to maternity wear itself and to the practices of dressing the pregnant body. With photographs of a seemingly endless list of pregnant A-list celebrities appearing routinely in the Western popular media and particularly mass-circulation magazines and the tabloid press, pregnancy—and specifically its dressing—has become infused with notions of glamour and display. Although excluded from the catwalk, maternity wear is included within designer ranges. Furthermore, at least for these celebrities, the pregnant body's most potent marker—"the bump"—and the prominence given to this through clothing's capacity to frame, has become an intensely competitive zone. Figure-hugging clothes, clinging fabrics, clothing cuts that enhance and accentuate the visibility of the bump, and

cropped tops that bare all, have all made their appearance on this stage. Indeed, this moment—one that can be traced to photographs of a scantily dressed and heavily pregnant Demi Moore in *Vanity Fair* in the early 1990s—was one of the starting points for the graduate research project on which this paper draws. However, notwithstanding that the interview process with pregnant women included long periods spent looking at and discussing an ever-expanding portfolio of photographic images taken from the media of pregnant celebrities, the research subjects here consistently drew strong lines of distinction between the pregnancies of these celebrities and their own. Not only were these celebrity women frequently regarded as having the perfect non-pregnant body but regarded perfection—however fabricated—extended to encompass their pregnant bodies too, a body which was contrasted to the blemishes and imperfections of their own, pregnant or not. Similarly, celebrities' clothing and styles of dressing pregnancy, whilst acknowledged to be "alright for them", were interpreted as "tasteless" (sometimes); as a financially unattainable level of glamour dressing; and as inappropriate to the everyday situations which many of these pregnant women found themselves having to accommodate their pregnancies to. For these research subjects, even those with strong investments in fashion, pregnancy chic and the maternity wear that comprises this figured primarily as a marker of otherness. We would add too that it connects with a very different value system in clothing consumption, one which centres the conspicuous acquisition and display of the new over circulation, and one that appears to value spending on the pregnant body over spending for the as yet unborn child. For the women in this research, many of whom were negotiating the connections between their pregnant identities and the identity of mother, to spend in this way was a matter of profound ambivalence.<sup>17</sup> So, whilst buying new and expensive things for the baby—notably a pram—was important for some, to spend in this way on clothing themselves during pregnancy was not. Open to being read critically by others, as selfish, and as not what the good mother does, pregnancy chic goes to the heart of maternal ambivalence—particularly for

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to Peter Jackson for pointing out the potential significance of maternal ambivalence and Rozsika Parker's book on the same subject (Parker, 1995). Although transitional to Parker's concerns with the maternal, pregnancy carries the same simultaneity and complexity of contradictory emotions, focused within and (usually) contained within the body. Pregnant identities, particularly once located within medical discourse, centre a self that is no longer a self but a self that is a support system for an increasingly known, felt, monitored and photographed other, or others, about whom feelings are neither necessarily consistent nor can be assumed to be positive. Pregnancy chic not only assumes an emotional capacity to display pregnancy positively and with pride, through its vaunting in cloth, cut and fabric of the bump, but elides over the complexities of subjectivities that are pregnant identities.

women whose incomes do not allow them to accommodate spending equivalent sums on self and a future baby. Perhaps then, it is not surprising that the only instances of special-purchase maternity wear encountered in this research were ones directly related to occasion-wear, for weddings, functions and celebrations. That these moments are ones which have considerable parallels with the production of the celebrity photo shoot is not without irony, but it is an irony that is lost on the majority of pregnant women when they respond to the images of celebrity pregnancy in circulation.

Secondly, and with respect to the circulation of maternity wear. Perhaps one of the most graphic moments in the traffick of maternity wear amongst women is the manner and the medium of its passage, through the black plastic bin-liner. Although such a practice could be interpreted as convenience mixed with pragmatism, we would suggest that there is more to it than this; specifically that the materiality of the bin-liner marks this clothing off as different, as separate from clothing purchased for the recipients' own wardrobe, as a wardrobe-within-a-wardrobe. Moreover, for all those instances discussed in Section 3, the tacitly understood practice of circulation is that each recipient will add to the maternity wear wardrobe, act as its temporary, careful custodian, and—just as critically—pass the bin liner on to another pregnant woman once she no longer has a use for it. In this way, women constitute a different sense of the wardrobe to that located in self-identity, ownership and possession; one in which the wardrobe is never wholly owned or possessed, in which specific pieces of clothing accumulate in their biographies and in their fabric the histories (and bodily geographies) of multiple women's pregnancies, and in which collective socialities of pregnancy are constituted through the journeys of a black bin liner and its contents. Although explicable in terms of the powerful conjuncture of moral economies of mothering and sartorial and embodied recovery rituals, maternity wear's divestment and its circulation is perhaps more critical for what it has to say about the traffick in clothing—its mobility—and the transience of clothing consumption. Its absence from many women's wardrobes is pregnant matter indeed.

More generally still, these practices have considerable purchase for our conceptualisations of wardrobe matter. We would highlight three issues as of key importance. First, the mobility of maternity wear and its movement between women's wardrobes is something which we do not consider to be unusual with respect to women's clothing generally. The instance of Ellie in Section 2 testifies to this. What this points to however, is the paucity of accounts which remain locked in the singularity of wardrobe matter and its identification with the accumulated, present, clothing matter of individual women. In such accounts the wardrobe functions as a repository of meaning and memory materialised in

clothing and as a bounded site of storage. In contrast, when we examine the flows in clothing and the entanglements these weave, the significance of individual wardrobes and their physical materiality recedes. Wardrobes becomes less the possessions of individuals and more temporary, transitory, spatial junctures, holding-places in the lives of things. Moreover, they also become spaces which facilitate exitings and which are therefore as much about passages, flows and divestment as they are about accumulated memorials and mementos. Secondly, this reading of wardrobe matter emphasises that wardrobes are not simply accumulations in clothing things but are embedded in the within-household consumption practices of tidying, sorting, storage and displacement. Although we talk of the lives of things, their circulation and their potential transience within households, it is nonetheless specific acts located in the on-going consumption work of caring for clothing that precipitate its movement and mobility. Thirdly and finally, perhaps the most significant implication of this paper is that it points to the importance of wardrobes as practice. Rather than persist with textual accounts that understand the wardrobe as a form of museum, and which see clothing as an accumulated collection which maps a life in clothing, we need to think rather more about how the wardrobe is positioned within clothing consumption practices enacted within households; as a fulcrum for clothing wearing, tidying and storage but also for clothing movement. In short, the spatialities of the wardrobe are rather more complex, fluid and entangled than the bounded, singular containers of materialised meaning which currently pervade our thinking.

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